

EDITORIAL – pp 235-244

Self-Reflective Practice and First-Person Action Research

Introduction

For this special issue we invited people working with self-reflective, first-person action research approaches to submit papers which would explore the range, richness, delights, challenges and dilemmas of these aspects of action research. We are using the term first-person action research (and first-person inquiry interchangeably) to differentiate aspects of action research theory and practice that focus on:

skills and methods [which] address the ability of the researcher to foster an inquiring approach to his or her own life, to act awarely and choicefully, and to assess effects in the outside world while acting. (Reason and Torbert, 2001, p17)

Our intention for this special issue was to review some of the diversity of people's self-reflective, first-person action research approaches, exploring what they mean in practice and how they are informed conceptually. We wanted to push at some of the challenges of this aspect of our work, especially that of how we know and show quality. Our invitation resulted in over twenty initial proposals for papers from a wide variety of action research traditions. We took this as a positive sign of what seems to be a growing recognition of the importance of grounding action research practice in first-person inquiry.

As guest editors we needed to consider issues of quality when we sent the submitted papers out for review. We read the papers and surfaced the kinds of questions we were asking about them, and from these generated the reviewers' report form. Some of the ratings are obvious and generic, such as how clear the paper is about its framing, choices and storyline. Also, obviously, we were seeking significant contributions to the theory and practice of first person action research. And we found that a key criterion for us was whether there was sufficient 'showing', speaking from experience, to evocatively accompany and illustrate 'telling', talking about inquiry. Achieving an appropriate combination of these qualities seems an important craft in the communication of action research.

Having offered our reviewers common criteria against which to comment, we were struck by some differences in their views and judgements about the various papers. Sometimes, one reviewer was asking the author to clarify how their work was first person action research, whilst another seemed well convinced of this and was asking questions within that genre. We asked ourselves: "What does this say about first-person action research?" Perhaps it is indicative of the current philosophical and methodological debate¹ about the impact, scope and purposes of different schools of action research that individual reviewers could express such a variety of views about the same papers? We content ourselves with the thought that perhaps it is inevitable – even desirable – in such a dynamic field as action research that there should be continuing questioning of quality criteria and standards of judgement.

In this editorial we have chosen to offer our reflections on what we see in the papers. We have greatly enjoyed reading, debating and re-reading them, and would like therefore to highlight and explore some of the textures, themes and issues they embody. Some themes

are common to all of the papers and most are addressed in interestingly different ways in several of them.

Doing first person action research in company

A major conclusion of these papers is that high quality, deeply questioning, first person action research is greatly supported if it is held within a long-term second person inquiry. For The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness this took the form of a seven-year (and ongoing) co-operative inquiry group into “white supremacist consciousness”; for Mann, it was a four-year psychotherapy training; for Nolan, it was a year-long commitment to completing individual daily Ignatian Spiritual Exercises with weekly visits to a spiritual guide.

The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness give examples of how the support and challenge offered in the safe space of their co-operative inquiry group enabled members to sustain their inquiries in the face of fear, shame and embarrassment and quote Taylor (2004, p.84) saying that ‘first person research that aims to unearth deeply held frames is not easy to do on your own’. Their paper shows us well how the act of telling one’s story to a group can be a catalyst for learning for oneself and for others. For example Victoria, whose experience had been so confronting that she temporarily shut down and could not learn from it, was stimulated by another group member, Rose, telling her story, to tell her own and thereby ‘let go of the shame’. Here we can see for ourselves the contributions of storytelling, of being heard, and of engaging in reflective discourse as active processes of inquiry.

Ramsay, goes further than this and, from a social constructionist perspective, claims that all action is unavoidably joint action and that this ‘creates a tension in any first person action research, for the rhetoric of writing about it will always create the impression of an individual agent’. Heen describes a more solitary approach to self-reflection, though we note that the critical incident that stimulated her inquiry occurred at a time when she was also training in Gestalt therapy – ‘an explicitly relational method’ – and she questions how, as an individual, one ‘imprints one’s own work and influences the outcome’.

Taken as a whole, these papers endorse our view that in the realm of first-person (as with second- and third-person) action research we flourish with the support of ‘friends willing to act as enemies’ (Torbert, 1976) and of ‘friends willing to act as friends’ (Marshall and Reason, 1993). With their help we are better able to develop inquiry practices - such as the quality of reflection-in-action described by The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness in Daniel’s story - that will serve us well as we seek to act with awareness and choice in the “outside world”. They can also provide a point of reference and accountability as we periodically check back in with stories of our intervening inquiries.

Whilst we would each also like to testify for the potential of self-supported first person action research, we acknowledge the potentially degenerative aspects of taking this approach, of engaging in misplaced heroic individualism as inquirer. We have both enjoyed the richness and learning of taking our individual inquiries into trusted co-inquiry spaces. Though one of us, perhaps as a result of male conditioning, still has a hankering to tilt at occasional windmills, sometimes believing that collective cogitation is no substitute for lone action. When, and how, to persist in our lone inquiry disciplines, and when, and how, to seek challenging and supportive company is another judgement, and inquiry, point in action research.

Personal exposure and vulnerability

We learn in several of the papers about the sense of personal exposure and vulnerability an inquirer might experience both in doing first person action research and certainly in speaking about it.

Heen speaks of her feelings as 'matter out of place', wonders if in her writing she is 'violating the rules about what should be told in public' and believes she 'risk[s] shame and rejection'. As Heen writes as inquiry (see below), we see this in process rather than simply hearing it reported. We notice the strength of the words she uses – 'sometimes it seems banal... making a big fuss out of nothing... making a fool of myself... it is too self-centred'. She notes the 'uneasiness [she has] felt about adopting such a personal form'.

Mann too is conscious of risking 'exposure of the personal self which lay behind the public instrument' as he offers three vignettes of his practice as an educator, newly informed by his Pessio-Boyden psychotherapy training. Indeed, he begins his paper... 'do I dare risk the vulnerability I feel writing this?'

Personal exposure and vulnerability are present, if implied, in the other papers too. Ramsay's introduction of poetry into an academic management course was not without risk of ridicule from colleagues and students. The pseudonymous stories in The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness's paper refer to the shame and embarrassment felt by members of the group as they faced challenges to their own "white supremacist consciousness"

Perhaps this is not surprising given the disturbance to self-image that is likely to arise when inquiring deeply into one's being and doing in the world. Without wishing to render oneself or others unnecessarily vulnerable, it may be that this "edginess" is a possible marker of quality in first-person action research, an indication of a willingness to work at one's "learning edge".

Working with first person action research to address significant social and political issues

The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness's paper shows clearly how first-person action research, supported by second-person collaborative inquiry, is at the heart of the work she and her colleagues are doing to challenge their own "white supremacist consciousness". The stories of Rose and Victoria catching themselves in the moment when their unconscious behaviour towards people of colour tripped them up testify to their commitment to develop their practice of "critical humility" through first-person action research. The long-term inquiry of The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness dramatically confronts both the politics of race and the politics of scholarship.

Nolan shows how his self-reflective practice of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises enabled him to reorient his life from the creation of personal wealth to the foundation of a major social initiative, the FIT project, aimed at re-skilling and employing marginalised job-seekers in Dublin. Again, a highly significant social intervention derived from and supported by ongoing first-person action research.

A charge sometimes levelled at first-person action research is that it can be overly focused on the individual, paying insufficient attention to wider issues and we are delighted to

include these two examples of first-person inquiry in the service of major social and political issues. Indeed, we see self-reflective practice of some kind as foundational for all forms of inquiry. If an inquirer is not paying attention to their own process and actions in the world we doubt their abilities to engage with others in respectful and mutual ways, especially if issues of power are involved.

Whilst acknowledging the possibility that first-person action research (like any other process) can be used degeneratively for ends that are merely self-serving, we would argue that an ever-present awareness of this possibility – such as that displayed by Heen as she continually meta-reflects on the value of what she is doing - is a distinguishing characteristic of high quality first-person action research.

Combining showing and telling

In our introductory remarks, we identified that, for us, a key criterion of the quality of writing first-person action research is an appropriate combination of “showing” (speaking from experience) and “telling” (talking about the inquiry). In these papers we see interestingly different approaches to achieving this interplay.

In *The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness* there is a clear thematic analysis to accompany the recounting of stories. Mann is more exploratory, with the narrative line more tacit than explicit, presenting affect, and showing movement in ways that strive to be analogically congruent with the themes presented. Heen offers quite a detailed phenomenological description of her experience whilst also questioning the limits of language to convey feelings, pointing out that talking about feelings is not actually to feel and suggesting that ‘if we are to communicate feelings outside the immediate situation, it is usually more effective to use poetic language, an artistic form or other means of analogue communication, than analytical terms’.

The papers illustrate some of the many challenges of seeking to achieve richness in accounts, especially if the author wants to portray the context well. But who can define context as it is so shaped by what meaning we are making? We encounter this issue in Ramsey’s paper. Even from the social constructionist perspective she adopts, she notes that she is narrating against her own selected purposes. Her eventual re-narration seeks to move beyond this, to blend her concerns about teaching from academic quality more appreciatively with the students’ apparent aims of professional development.

We see in different ways in all these articles the vitality and power of story to evoke and convey meaning. For example we learn of Nolan’s life as a vital element of understanding who he is as an inquirer and actor in the world: we get closer to Mann’s practice as an educator through the graphic quality of the three vignettes in the second part of his paper: we see how Ramsay works towards the social performance of education through her imaginative incorporation and re-narration of others’ stories.

Writing as inquiry

Sometimes the process of writing itself is a form of self-reflective practice. Heen shows us how her inquiry unfolded with the writing, and so took its own direction, and therefore exemplified itself, rather than being pre-planned to correspond to a ‘reality’ that needed to be portrayed. The result is a text that is nuanced, alive, and sometimes raw in its self-questioning. We are invited to share her reflecting “in real time” and accompany her to the point where the reasons for her mixed feelings about first-person action research became

clearer through the process of writing, and her inquiry comes to a natural, though perhaps temporary, conclusion. With Mann too one gets the sense of how his understanding unfolds as he writes the stories of his colleagues' and his own experience.

A question to ask ourselves, as writers and editors, is how can the freshness of writing as inquiry be retained in a crafted paper as it goes through revisions? We think there is a delicate balance to be struck and a light touch is needed to avoid "killing" the text. Such papers need to be carefully framed, as these are, to enable the reader to get alongside the writer sufficiently well to engage with them constructively and critically.

Seeing self-reflective inquiry practices in action

These papers also give us some insights into the different disciplines that people draw on to inform their practices. For example, Nolan shows how Ignatian Spirituality and action research intertwine, noting 'their common efforts to show that the search for meaning and understanding of self and of the world is best facilitated by a close, constant attending to and reflection on our daily actions and experiences'. He describes the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises as a process of radical questioning, both alone, through chosen disciplines, and with a guide. Heen identifies her gestalt training as offering new disciplines of experiencing and perceiving that informed her action research practice.

Often in action research publications such descriptions of inquiry practices are skimmed, if given at all. Of course, we can never see into the process fully although we do glimpse it in action in Heen's self-reflective writing as inquiry. We get insights also in Mann's paper of the experiential learning process involved in the Pessio-Boyden training. Ramsay leads us through her use of a narrative learning cycle and The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness describe in some detail the place of mutual storytelling in the co-operative inquiry group that supports their first-person action research practice.

Heen suggests that we often lack formal training in the practical arts of doing research and, acknowledging that this may be the case, we would like to emphasise just how helpful and interesting it is to be told some of the practical details of what action researchers actually do. From this we gain some sense of the quality claimed for the inquiry processes and we are given the opportunity to learn and deepen our own practice.

Rounding out what first person action research means

What kinds of behaviours are intrinsic to first-person action research? We suspect that all of us would respond differently and probably none of us would attempt a definitive answer. Yet, in espousing forms such as "living life as inquiry" (Marshall, 1999) and "living inquiry" (Mead, 2001) we do have some sense of what we believe first-person action research can mean. The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness offer us some valuable suggestions in this arena, identifying five interrelated behaviours, which – supported by participation in co-operative inquiry may then 'enhance the integrity of insights achieved in the first-person inquiry'.

- living in the inquiry
- practising new behaviours
- reflecting-in-action
- conceptualizing new learning about one's identity
- staying present to a range of emotional responses

They also tentatively suggest the importance of cultivating a quality of being they call “critical humility”, which they define as ‘the practice of being simultaneously committed and confident about our knowledge and action in the world while remaining open to discovering that our knowledge is partial and evolving.’ We feel that these behaviours and qualities of being, which are described and exemplified in their paper, enhance our ability to articulate and give shape to the varieties of first-person action research practice.

Inquiry is a whole person activity

It is clear from all the papers that, for these first-person action researchers at least, inquiry is much more than an intellectual pursuit. We might go so far as to call it a whole person activity.

Mann’s paper implicates the body in inquiry through movement and physical enactment of internal dialogues in the Pessio-Boyden psychotherapy training that informs his practice as an educator. Heen draws on her Gestalt background to highlight the role of bodily feelings as important data in the midst of inquiry and muses on the way feelings are sometimes seen to belong “backstage” in action research. Ramsay claims an important role for the imagination in the process co-ordinating others’ stories into re-narrated stories of future action.

And the papers have much to say about the emotional aspects of first-person action research. The European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness suggest that emotions can ‘block authentic meaning making or catalyze meaningful learning’. They show how Daniel’s tears of recognition signalled a sudden moment of insight, how Rose’s moment of embarrassment and fear caused her to reflect on her behaviour, how Victoria’s sense of shame at being called “so *gringa*” caused her to avoid addressing her behaviour for some months. These powerful emotions seem to have been aroused when the inquirer’s core identity (in this case as European-Americans pledged to better understand racism, whiteness and privilege) was deeply challenged by noticing the nature of what our colleague at the University of Bath, Jack Whitehead has called the “living contradiction” (Whitehead, 1993) between their values and their behaviour.

Heen and Mann both write about first-person action research that seeks to work with and connect aspects of ourselves that are often presented as polarities. Heen speaks of living and researching in the split between rationality and emotions. Mann is concerned to show how his immersion in Pessio-Boyden psychotherapy training has offered him possibilities for linking the tacit/affective/limbic mind with the explicit/rational/neocortical mind to ‘sharpen the instrument’ of himself as a practising educator.

Nolan’s paper shows us that the practice and sometimes the consequences, of first-person action research can have a significant impact on one’s own life direction and on the lives of those around us. Speaking with some understatement, and referring to the sale of his business assets and his commitment to work with the poor and marginalised, he says ‘these were life-determining choices, not only for me but also for my family’. It is a powerful reminder that “living life as inquiry” requires the courage to step into the unknown and take risks as well as the discipline to develop and exercise our intellectual understanding.

Challenging edges

Two of the papers in particular ask us to question some of the emerging conventions of self-reflective practice. Ramsay conceives inquiry from a social constructionist approach and

introduces a range of relevant conceptual resources through her paper, and so challenges the notion of individual agency, which so readily springs to hand from our everyday language of action and reflection, even though we might understand the world more interactively. She points out that 'for a reflective practitioner the implication of this is that there is no distinguishable or concrete experience to reflect upon and there is no way of unequivocally determining that any narrating of an experience is the definitive one upon which to base further reflection and theorising.' She seeks, then, to shift from experience to story, and acknowledges the inevitable existence of other stories of equal worth.

This raises questions of how we can speak and write about inquiry from this perspective. Ramsay seeks to articulate relational processes of invitation and reciprocal contribution by conceiving of life as narrative and exploring learning cycles of narration, engaging with others through co-ordinating and re-narrating their stories, leading to what she calls "social performance."

Another challenging edge is the limitation of the notion of first-person action research itself. Heen argues that it can become idealised and might detract from spontaneous living. She asks whether too much inquiring can destroy relationships to the sacred and argues for the intrinsic value of experience that is unreflected and undescribed and should stay so. Despite being drawn to inquire deeply into her practice, she says 'I believe in many cases it would be more fruitful to get away from the words and reflections, and just let the experiences be.'

And finally

Maybe as editors we need to acknowledge this paradox/duality/ambivalence: sometimes first-person action research feels like an incredibly significant existential choice demanding no less than all we have and are – at other times its significance, even its possibility, seems to slip away, like quicksilver in the hand.

With these thoughts in mind we invite you now to turn to the papers themselves. We hope you enjoy reading them as much as we have and that you will agree with us that they offer us many opportunities to enrich our understanding of the possibilities, challenges and dilemmas of first-person action research.

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ⁱ See, for example Davydd Greenwood's and Bjorn Gustavsen's papers on action research perspectives in *Concepts and Transformation* 7(2), 2002 and 8(1) 2003 and subsequent discussion papers from Bob Dick, Olav Eikeland, Morten Levin, Peter Reason and John Shotter in *Concepts and Transformation* 8(3), 2003